



Tiger trumped, but U.S. close

Chicago Sun-Times | September 28, 2002

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SUTTON COLDFIELD, England--With a furious comeback Friday afternoon, the U.S. Ryder Cup players did their best to dispel the image of being 12 individuals and not a unified team.

But the No. 1 individual in the world was singled out once again for his failures in team play.

Europe took a 4 1/2-3 1/2 lead after Day 1 of the 34th Ryder Cup matches at the Belfry, but the score wasn't nearly as surprising as Tiger Woods losing both of his matches to run his career record to 3-8-1.

"That's the beauty of the Ryder Cup," said Sergio Garcia, who combined with Lee Westwood for a 2-and-1 victory over Woods and Mark Calcavecchia in foursomes. "The best player in the world can lose easily, and a guy that doesn't look like he's playing well can get a point."

Woods and Paul Azinger ran into a buzzsaw in their morning best-ball match, carding nine birdies yet losing to Thomas Bjorn and Darren Clarke. And in the alternate-shot match, Woods provided the turning point by missing short par putts on back-to-back holes.

"Tiger played well this morning, but he let it get away this afternoon," U.S. captain Curtis Strange said. "That hurts. You cannot allow yourself to slip at all in these matches.

"He feels as though he let the team down, which is good. It makes you come back hungrier the next day."

Despite the mediocre performance in foursomes, Strange is sending Woods back out for another alternate-shot match this morning--this time with his third partner, Davis Love.

"When you have a player the caliber of Tiger Woods, whatever the record, I'm not sitting him down," Strange said. "You go with your horses. If you get beat, you get beat."

The heavily favored Americans were looking quite beat after the morning four-balls. Strange had urged his team to come out firing in the first session, but it was Europe that took command by winning three of the four

matches.

Things weren't looking much better in the afternoon until Hal Sutton and Scott Verplank rallied for a 2-and-1 victory over Bjorn and Clarke. The comeback continued when Phil Mickelson and David Toms, 3 down since the eighth hole, birdied three in a row to square their match with Colin Montgomerie and Bernhard Langer through 17 holes.

With a chance to even the overall score, Mickelson missed the fairway on the 18th. But Langer's approach from the middle of the fairway flew the green, and Toms chopped out of the rough and onto the front of the green.

Facing a 100-foot putt up two tiers, Mickelson chose to chip off the green and left Toms with an eight-footer. Montgomerie almost chipped in but ran it six feet by, and both Toms and Langer missed their par putts.

"That was a hell of a comeback," Strange said. "It's terrible to finish with a bogey, but even that was exciting. The half-point was huge for our psyche. We might look at that match and say that was the one that turned it around."

It was one of three matches that came down to the final hole. Mickelson and Toms outlasted Padraig Harrington and Niclas Fasth in four-ball, surviving when Harrington's 20-footer for birdie lipped out.

The best match of the day, though, was the first one. Woods and Azinger combined for five birdies on the front nine--four by Woods--yet led only 1 up. Bjorn and Clarke holed putt after putt on the back to take a 2-up lead with two to play, but after Woods won the par-5 17th with a birdie, it looked as though the Americans might pull out a half-point when Azinger hit it stiff at 18.

As he had done all match, Bjorn came through with the putter, sinking an 18-footer for a 1-up victory.

"We knew we had to play great to win," Clarke said. "We were making birdies all over the place, as were Tiger and Zinger. Any time you play against Tiger, you're going to have a tough game, but we stuck to our guns and knocked in a couple of really big putts at the right time."

Woods said he was disappointed to shoot so low and lose, but he was in no mood to talk after the alternate-shot match. All square through 10 holes, Calcavecchia left him with a four-foot par putt, while Westwood faced a 25-footer for par. The Englishman drained it, though, and Woods shoved his to the right.

"That turned the entire momentum of the match," Woods told a PGA of America official. "It looked like they were making bogey and we were

making par to take a 1-up lead, and exactly the opposite happened."

It happened again on the par-3 12th, where Woods missed from 2-1/2 feet, allowing the Europeans to win their third straight hole.

The rally by Mickelson and Toms improved the aftertaste of Day 1 for the Americans. They will send out their most successful pairing in the opening match this morning against Pierre Fulke and Phillip Price, both playing their first Ryder Cup match.

"It would have been disappointing not to get at least a half-point," Mickelson said of the comeback. "Now we're only one behind, so the first match tomorrow gives us an opportunity to square it."

The Europeans, meanwhile, could take comfort in shutting out the Americans' top gun--and in having a one-point edge.

"Any time you beat Tiger is a fantastic result," Montgomerie said. "We're going in disappointed, but to lead after the first day is very important. We know how strong [the U.S.] team is in singles. We need to have a lead going into Sunday."